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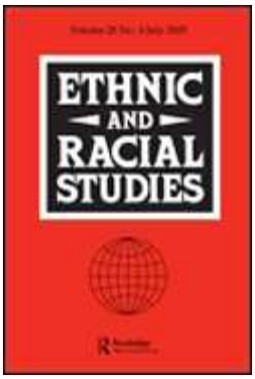

What is the meaning of 'black'?: Researching black respondents

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What is the Meaning of 'Black'[i]?: Researching 'Black' Respondents

Abstract

'Black' is a contested term. Its usage has attracted much academic debate. Issues of terminology are important as they produce real consequences for the lives of those using and/or who are subsumed within particular definitions. A study designed to explore the experiences of 'black' staff in further education provides the impetus for examining the impact of using generic terms such as 'black' on the data collection process and its significance for those subsumed under the category. The paper explores the implications of employing collective terminology in arriving at shared meanings and understandings. It highlights the ways in which the funders of the study and a group of prospective research institutions and participants constructed and in some instances resisted the term 'black'. This is also a reflexive account of some of the challenges and ethical conflicts encountered during the research process.

Keywords: 'Black'; self-definition; 'difference', in/exclusion; reflexivity; ethics

'Black' as a political signifier

'Black' as a political signifier has at times been used to identify those who experience structural and institutional discrimination because of their skin colour; namely peoples of

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African, African-Caribbean and South Asian origin. Mirza (1997, p.3) describes 'black' as being:

> *About a state of 'becoming' (racialised); a process of consciousness, when colour becomes the defining factor about who you are. Located through your 'otherness' a 'conscious coalition' emerges: a self-consciously constructed space where identity is not inscribed by a natural identification but a political kinship.*

Mercer (2000) and Solomos and Back (2000) support this notion of 'political kinship'. For Mercer (2000, p. 210) political definitions of 'blackness' are reflective of 'a form of symbolic unity' which arose 'out of the signifiers of racial difference' and similarities in experience of racial oppression and history (e.g. colonialism). Such 'symbolic unity' and a commitment to being 'black' prevailed between the 1960s and 1980s in Britain. During this time, a common identification with a 'black' identity was used positively by coalitions of African, African-Caribbean and South Asian organisations in their struggles against racial discrimination and quest for racial justice (Phoenix 1998; Sudbury 2001; Alexander 2002). Modood (1997, p. 337) contends that these 'antiracist solidarities' were formed as a response to the 'sense of rejection' and 'insecurity' these communities felt at the hands of the white majority. Arguably, the effectiveness of the coalitions amongst these ethnically diverse groups was based on the fact that they placed greater emphasis on their similarities rather than their 'differences' (Sarup 1991).

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'Black' as an inclusive research category

The use of the term 'black' in research has engendered much discussion about its meaning, appropriateness and the consequences of its usage. Aspinall (2002, p. 810) for example, claims that the category 'black', while having a precise meaning when used by individuals as a 'self-identifier', becomes 'imprecise' when 'used as a collective term for groups perceived to share some common ethnic attributes'. He maintains that when 'black' is employed 'as a term of self-identity' it 'sets it apart from the collective meaning of the term to encompass all minority ethnic groups' (ibid). This is illustrated for instance, by the selection of the category 'Black British' (introduced in the 2001 Census) by individuals born in Britain and the 'reclaiming' of 'black' by African and African-Caribbean groups (Aspinall, 2002) with 'the splintering of the black consensus' (Alexander 2002, p. 553) in the 1990s. According to Parekh (2000, p. 29) 'blackness' became an 'essential part' of African-Caribbean self-definition in Britain following their 'rediscovery of an African (…) past'. Ethnic group self-selection is considered 'a pre-eminent necessity' (Cole 2003, p. 963). However, in trying to comprehend how the category 'black' is used by those subsumed within it, Aspinall (2002, p. 811) notes that:

> *Establishing which terms – overarching or specific – are salient or acceptable to the different ethnic groups is problematic because the choice of terminology is strongly context-or situationally dependent and some people have allegiances to more than one identity.*

Aspinall's (2002) contention is exemplified by the following quote:

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> *I would view myself as a member of the following communities, depending on the context and in no particular order: black, Asian, Azad Kashmiri, Kashmiri, Mirpuri, Jat, Maril'ail, Kungriwalay, Pakistani, English, British, Yorkshireman, Bradfordian (...) Any attempt to define me as only one of these would be meaningless (Bradford Commission 1996, p. 92).*

As the quote above indicates individual identities are not only complex, but are always in a state of becoming (Hall 1996, 2000). Like individual identities, 'Black' identities are 'constantly [being] redefined in the light of shifting public discourse and political necessities' (Sudbury 2001, p. 44).

Nazroo and Karlsen (2003, p. 902) argue that collective terminologies 'are of limited use if we seek to understand the processes that actually produce a sense of [an individual's] and others' ethnic affiliation'. When 'black' is used in ethnic monitoring as a broad or headline category it is deemed less useful in reflecting the diversity of the groups it purports to refer to (Aspinall 2002), and can hide important differences (and similarities) between and within peoples encompassed within the term (Solomos and Back 2000). Modood (1994a/b) opines that the lack of recognition of South Asian diversity (e.g. language, religion) in the category 'black' has contributed to cultural differences within South Asian communities being obscured, and as such it 'harms' 'Asian's' as it marginalises/silences their experiences (see also Phillips 2007). As well as negating South Asian experiences, the political definition 'black' fails to elucidate the specificity of the everyday experiences and/or identities of the groups concerned and the

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ways in which collective identities are differentiated (by ethnicity, class, gender) and/or experience racisms. It ignores also the exclusionary effects of inclusive terminology (Solomos and Back 1996; Werbner and Modood 1997; Anthias 2001).

Phoenix (1998, p. 863) suggests that the reason for 'black' being a contested term is that 'some of those included in it, and some of those excluded from it, seek to change its usage in attempts to redress power imbalances'. One of the consequences of groups trying to redress perceived power imbalances is rather than acting collectively, they focus on their 'differences', and by so doing they work against each other as they act separately and/or in competition with each other. This can be potentially harmful as the power imbalances remain with 'differences' over emphasised and further divisions created between these respective groups (Sarap 1991). Brah (2000, pp. 433-434) similarly contends that the generic term 'black' can 'fail to address the relationship between 'difference' and the social relations of power in which it may be inscribed'.

The fragmentation of the 'black' accord witnessed during the 1990s together with the increasing emphasis in recent years on 'difference', particularly between African-Caribbean and South Asian groups, led Alexander (2002, p. 552) to argue for a discourse that goes 'beyond black'; one in which the 'colour/culture divide' is re-thought. Phillips (2007, p.377) however, asserts that rather than the death of 'black' as a political category it has been 'resurrected in the early twenty-first century to challenge racism', but that its usage 'displays all the familiar hallmarks and tensions of inclusion/exclusion' (ibid, p. 392) that existed before. The 're-emergence' of 'black' as a political signifier as

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evidenced by Phillips (2007) has brought with it the need to review its meaning and relevance for those incorporated within the category. This article attempts to add to this on-going debate by exploring the impact of the inclusive term 'black' on the data collection process. It aims to demonstrate how potential respondents can be excluded on one level by the definition of 'black' employed, and on another, choose to exclude themselves from the research process owing to misgivings as to what constitutes 'black'. The article argues for more critical reflection on the effects of using inclusive terms in collecting data.

The study

The study, funded by the Commission for Black Staff in Further Education, was conducted between 2001 and 2002. It sought to develop an understanding of the numbers and experiences of 'black' staff (lecturers/support) working in Further Education (FE). 'Black' staff were defined by the funders as 'members of African, African-Caribbean, Asian and other visible minority ethnic communities who are oppressed by racism'. An integral element of the research was therefore to identify institutional racism within the sector and the processes through which discrimination and racism operate.

The study consisted of a national survey of all 412 FE and sixth form colleges in England. The survey assessed Black staff numbers, their employment position and roles, the curriculum areas lecturing staff teach in, how 'black' staff are developed, promoted and retained and the type of contracts they are employed on. Recruitment and selection

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processes were explored together with employment policies. In order to compare and contrast employment positions and experiences of 'black' and white staff, similar data was collected on white staff working in the sector.

Additionally, quantitative and qualitative data was obtained from eight case study colleges located in ethnically and geographically diverse areas across England; six of whom had a percentage of 'black' staff ranging from 10-35 per cent[ii] and two which were classified as predominantly white. A questionnaire distributed to all staff produced statistical data on staff numbers, employment positions and their perspectives/experiences of equality procedures and practices at their respective colleges. Interviews were undertaken with 'black' and white lecturers/support staff and managers with responsibility for staffing, staff development and equal opportunities. The intention was also to hold focus group discussions with two groups of 'black' and two groups of white staff in teaching and support positions in each institution. A target of eight respondents was set for each focus group. In two institutions, the 'black' staff attendance exceeded this number three-fold.

The case studies, participants and colleges were given pseudonyms and respondents were assured confidentiality and anonymity.

Equality policies were gathered during both the national and case study research.

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Defining/monitoring 'black' staff

As stated earlier, the inclusive term 'black' was used in this study to refer to members of 'African, African-Caribbean, Asian and other visible minority ethnic communities who are oppressed by racism'. This definition was prominent on the survey questionnaire and the accompanying letters that were sent to each FE institution requesting statistical information. An initial pilot of the questionnaire utilised in the national survey had suggested that the definition of 'black' to be adopted was amenable to the FE sector as no objections were raised. During the national survey it was noticeable that not all of the responding colleges agreed with the definition of 'black' applied as a few noted their disapproval and declined to comply with the survey. Two colleges, whilst having reservations about the definition nevertheless completed the questionnaire, with one submitting the following response:

> *I was uncomfortable about completing the survey given the definition of 'black' by the Commission, as I find this very offensive. To state that 'black' means 'members of African, African-Caribbean, Asian and other visible minority ethnic communities who are oppressed by racism' seems to me to be making huge assumptions about the perceptions of any staff from ethnic minority backgrounds as to whether or not they consider themselves to be 'oppressed by racism', and also to be implying that we as their employers are so oppressing them. I hope that, as employers, colleges are not expected to ask their 'black' staff for their views as to whether this definition applies to them, as I do not feel that this would be either appropriate or constructive. ... (HR manager)*

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This college found the definition 'very offensive', but arguably they were more concerned that the survey would encourage 'black' staff to question if they experienced racism and/or other inequalities in their working environment. Notwithstanding, objections such as these may have accounted for some colleges with significant numbers of 'black' staff not responding to the survey.

It is not unusual for research to use terms that are not amenable to the institutions or groups being studied. In Carter *et al's* (1999) study participants objected to the use of 'ethnic minority' in reference to themselves as the term 'minority' can be misleading (Brah 1996; Parekh 2000; Aspinall 2002). The pigeonholing of diverse groups into inappropriate ethnic categories is likely to have a negative impact on the process of ethnic monitoring (Bonnett and Carrington 2001) and overall data collection. This was evident in the national survey and was further illustrated by staff who declined to be involved in the institutional case study survey:

> *I think that the definition given of black staff is too vague and unsuitable to a multicultural society.*

> *I do not consider myself 'black' or any other shade for that matter. As far as I am concerned we are all created equal and are equal. I find such surveys, schemes etc. extremely divisive and unconstructive. As such I wish to play no part in this survey.*

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The importance of self-identification also posed difficulties for colleges when trying to produce accurate survey returns of the numbers of their 'black' staff:

> *Whilst the survey only identifies one black employee it is not entirely representative. The college has five permanent employees who in terms of their complexion would be regarded by many people as being black. However, only one of these employees has formally identified themselves as black. On questionnaires they have returned to the college they have either chosen not to answer the question or have chosen white. Clearly, the question of ethnic origin is subjective, which leads to a situation where two people from the same ethnic background can legitimately regard themselves as having different ethnic origins. (HR manager)*

Hall (2000, p. 152) encourages us to question the 'negative consequences of (…) positionality'. It seems that the research was not only positioning prospective respondents as 'black', but also asking them to conform to an identity, which was viewed by some as false and non-specific and/or 'uncomfortable'. The above comment by a human resources manager suggests that some 'black' employees are fearful of being identified and/or labelled 'black' because they are unsure what the ethnic monitoring information is going to be used for. Such concerns are not unfounded as it has been shown that ethnic monitoring 'can reproduce racism by entrenching racial categories' (Bhavnani *et al*. 2005, p.1). Anxieties about ethnic monitoring were apparent in one case study college where 17 per cent of the staff surveyed did not comply with the ethnicity question. It is not known how many of these staff were 'black' or how the 'black' non-questionnaire respondents wanted to be defined, but it is notable that just as some 'black' staff objected

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to the definition of 'black' applied, a few white staff also found the ethnic monitoring process problematic:

> *It is high time the terms black and white were omitted from ethicity surveys. They are outmoded and useless. (NB: I have mixed race children)*

'Black' engagement/non-engagement with the research

The case study element of the research posed particular challenges in terms of engaging 'black' staff in focus group discussions. The greatest difficulties were encountered in a college with a low proportion of 'black' staff.

Although the case study research was asking 'black' staff to share employment experiences of a sensitive nature, there was an implicit assumption (on the part of the research team) that the staff being sought for the focus groups would participate because they regarded themselves as 'black', and had opinions on their college's equality practices, and their work experiences in relation to this. This assumption was supported by the individual case study staff questionnaire responses received which had indicated that there were a range of experiences that some staff wished to highlight (albeit anonymously). However, this perception was disrupted in one college when only three 'black' respondents turned up for one focus group and one individual for another. Candid discussions with the sole focus group participant and an individual interviewee revealed a level of uncertainty amongst 'black' staff at the college about the purpose of the research, and at the same time uneasiness about the meaning of the term 'black':

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When we received emails about you coming to do this, we within ourselves had quite a reaction and some staff felt that it was divisive and some staff felt that we should not be looking at ourselves as black or white staff. Some staff sent an email back in a very clear and positive way, saying, "no, this is why this is happening, we need to address this, the word black means this, this and this".

Staff concerns about the concept 'black' and participating in research with 'black' as a central focus need to be seen in the context in which the case study research was undertaken. First, it was about people's workplace experiences of equality and secondly, the study was conducted in their workplace with senior management staff in some respects acting as gatekeepers. Prior to the commencement of the case study research, the research team visited each institution and sought the assistance of these gatekeepers in publicising the research, distributing and collecting the individual staff questionnaires and eliciting respondents for the focus groups. During the case study visits posters designed by the research team were put in prominent positions in each college as a means of informing staff about the study and attracting focus group volunteers. A letter attached to the staff questionnaire further informed staff about the study. Thirdly, there was an expectation (by the research team) that focus group respondents would be self-selecting and in choosing to attend one of the groups would have their confidentiality and anonymity respected. Despite the research team's best efforts to ensure that senior management staff understood the salience of staff self-selection and anonymity, at one particular institution, some 'black' staff, rather than self-selecting for the focus groups, were insensitively identified by senior management. The quote cited above referred to

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staff at this college being informed about the research via college emails. The email request for people to join focus groups was however, only sent to a list of 'black' staff names selected by HR/management. The email asked that those wishing to attend a focus group inform the personnel department of their availability. This initial request for focus group volunteers led to a series of email exchanges between a group of designated 'black' staff. This exchange continued during the case study visit. Some of the emails[iii] from 'black' staff questioned the selection process for the focus groups, in particular the basis on which a 'black' staff list had been compiled and the definition of 'black' that had been used in doing this:

> *I want to know how this list was prepared? Was any foreign sounding name automatically assumed to be 'black'? Such blanket application does not work. For instance, how many people of Chinese origin would consider themselves as black? The Jews are regarded as white, does this mean they all have fair skins? Consider the term 'Caucasian' that refers to an area that has peoples of varying skin colours and shades, and yet 'Caucasian white' is another blanket term used. If I had time I could go on and on.*

The personnel department at the institution concerned had sought to identify 'black' staff for the groups through data submitted by individual staff as part of the college's own ethnic monitoring process, requests made to union representatives and management appeals (via email) to designated 'black' staff. Informal discussions with union representatives indicated that although they were approached by senior management for named suggestions of 'black' staff for the focus groups, they did not

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offer any, as they did not want to break staff confidences. Arguably, it was not difficult for some 'black' staff to be designated as 'black' by the college, as the numbers were small (as determined by the national survey) and some were known by name because of the positions they occupied; two for example held management positions. Nonetheless, the use of institutional ethnic monitoring and soliciting union representatives to identify potential respondents raises questions of institutional power and confidentiality, and whether or not data that is given for one purpose can be legitimately used for another without further consent being sought. The mechanisms adopted by the senior management staff in question for getting 'black' staff for the focus groups is reflective of institutional racism (Macpherson 1999).

The email exchanges between this group of 'black' non-respondents offer an insight into why institutional (and researchers) efforts to recruit 'black' staff to the focus groups proved fruitless; some were unsure whether they considered themselves 'black' and what the defining features were. In trying to define the term 'black' one of the email writers went to great lengths (four emails) to outline the historical common struggles that had contributed to the development of 'black' as a political category in Britain. The staff reactions were indicative of some staff not being 'politically aware' (Sarup 1991) with regard to being 'black'. Staff comments suggest that some found the term 'black' ambiguous seeing it as a colour signifier as opposed to a historical, political and cultural category (Hall 1996, 2000) or even a unifier. A few considered it 'old hat' and irrelevant in the twenty-first century. In disagreeing with its irrelevance, the main email writer made reference to structural inequality in society and the need to 'address existing

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inequalities'. It was intimated that 'oppressed' groups should be prepared to raise issues of inequality and use the policy process to fight the 'common cause' and to influence and effect change. It was advocated that the 'big bullies' who are 'exercising [their institutional] powers unfairly on the defenceless and the vulnerable' and who are requiring 'black' people to 'prove' themselves should be challenged. In effect 'black' staff were being encouraged to assert their identity as 'black' people and engage in the research as a way of challenging the status quo and bringing about institutional change, but none seem prepared to take the next step and participate in the focus groups. This lack of engagement encourages one to question if it is simply a-political not to claim 'blackness' or acknowledge institutional racism? Whilst the collective 'call to arms' failed, the stance adopted by most of this email group could be viewed as political (albeit with a small 'p') and not just an inability or unwillingness by some to identify with a political definition of 'black'. Notwithstanding, for the non-politicised (i.e. those who 'had not been through the debates around being/not being 'black'' as one interviewee argued) the term was insignificant. This is reminiscent of Bulmer and Solomos's (1998) concerns about political definitions of 'black' and identity politics discussions that occur as part of this. They contend that such discussions are 'underpinned by the presumption that one's identity necessarily defines one's politics' and that what is needed is an understanding of 'the way in which [collective] identit[ies] grow out of and [are] transformed by action and struggle' (ibid, p.826).

In an attempt to get a group together to highlight their employment experiences and equality concerns I sent an email to all the 'black' staff on the circulation list that I

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had received. The email also sought to address staff concerns by explaining how the definition of 'black' had been arrived at and by pointing out that:

> *The case study questionnaire, which was sent to all staff, makes it clear that the research team are interested in hearing (via the questionnaire and focus groups) about the employment experiences of 'black' and 'white' staff who work in FE. The intention is to use staff contributions to inform policy and practice which is aimed at improving equality for all staff nationally in the FE sector.*

Shortly after, the following response was received:

> *I note the comments from [name of researcher] particularly in relation to this staff circulation list. However, it appears that the discrimination continues, as the circulation has not been revised. I would suggest that this group does not reflect [name of researcher's] intention.*

These staff were aggrieved that by the institutional circulation of 'black' staff only, the process had served to discriminate against 'black' staff. The apparent lack of understanding as to the focus of the research and the intended contributors is worth exploring further. Staff emails suggest that despite being informed about the nature of the research (as outlined earlier), some 'black' staff had failed to comprehend that the research, whilst emphasising 'black' staff experiences, was also seeking the experiences of white staff (and that they too had been similarly targeted). It is likely that this lack of understanding combined with overriding concerns about being identified as 'black'

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punctuated reasons for most of this college's 'black' staff lack of engagement with the focus groups. The issue of the 'black'/white dichotomy in this study is particularly problematic as it seemed to have undermined both the inclusion and salience of 'black' and white staff experiences. It is also possible that negative perceptions about research directed at 'black' people accounted for the limited individual 'black' questionnaire completion at this institution:

> *When you put it down on black staff, I think most (...) just read the headline and they don't go through all the forms, they just see the top line and if it's anything to do with black people it will end up in the bin.*

Phoenix (1994, p. 53) observed that issues of 'race' and racism tend to generate 'ideological' reasons for 'black' non-engagement such as 'what research has done to black people' (see also Moodley 2003). Without asking the non-respondents why they refused to take part one can only speculate as to their reasoning. It is possible (as Phoenix concluded in her own study) that some of those who refused to participate may have considered the research 'damaging, rather than beneficial to them' (ibid), especially as staff questioned if colleges are 'going to treat one better if they consider one 'black'? Clearly, some 'black' staff saw the research as dangerous because instead of completing the individual staff questionnaire, an article entitled 'Errors of the Afrocentrists' (by Wortham 1995) was put in envelopes provided for individual questionnaire returns to highlight strength of feeling on the issue. Notwithstanding, this lack of compliance and angst could have been more reflective of disquiet with institutional equality practices as prior to the agreement of the involvement of the college as a case study, the college

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management inferred that 'negative experiences' (presumably encountered in the college) could affect 'black' staff responses.

An unintended, but nevertheless positive consequence of this study is that the college request for focus group volunteers stimulated staff discussion (via the emails) about being 'black', and the relevance of participating in research on such a basis. The study also contributed to a few thinking about the positions 'black' and white staff occupied within the institution, the reason for this and the fact that such issues needed to be debated more openly:

> *We need some kind of platform, black staff to be able to address our own place, where we are ourselves, all of us from lecturers out there to cleaners, all of us need to readdress and redefine where we're at. (...) higher positions are held by non-black people and why is it?*

One interviewee was hopeful that the research would 'make a significant difference for all staff regardless of ethnicity'. There were however, no other focus group meetings or email contributions from 'black' staff at this college. Given the sensitivity of the area of focus, this is hardly surprising. It was noticeable from the individual 'black' staff interviews conducted that some of the experiences shared would not have been forthcoming in a group context because of concerns about others knowing about their negative experiences. Some were fearful of being identified through quotes and were keen to ensure they were not misinterpreted; some questionnaire respondents deleted questionnaire identification numbers in order to prevent being further identified. This

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suggests that more detailed considerations might be required when trying to engage the participation of 'black' staff in research.

Other research challenges

Finlay (2002, p. 212) argues that exploring challenges within the research process can be valuable, but cautions that 'confessing to methodological inadequacies can be uncomfortable'. As well as having a political definition of 'black', a decision was made by the funders to have the research (in particular the case study fieldwork) conducted by 'black' researchers. This strategy was adopted as a means of aiding the data collection process because as Madriz (2003, p. 380) states:

> *A facilitator of the same race/ethnicity as participants usually enhances rapport and increases the willingness of participants to respond. A facilitator of the same racial or ethnic background contributes to participants' feeling that the facilitator shares with them common experiences.*

However, as was demonstrated in this study and as reported elsewhere (e.g. Phoenix 1994; Bhopal 1995; Song and Parker 1995; Johnson-Bailey 1999) simply 'matching' researchers with the research sample is insufficient to ensure the participation and/or engagement of potential participants from the same prescribed ethnic group(s). Moreover, at some of the colleges involved in this study perceived interviewee/interviewer compatibility did not result in the greater participation of 'black' staff, or 'black' staff being any more willing to share their experiences with the 'black'

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researchers. This was evidenced where the individual 'black' staff member being recruited or interviewed was the only 'black' person in that position. In these instances there were no assumptions (on the part of respondents) of empathetic shared experiences and understandings with those of the researchers. Furthermore, whilst the 'black' researchers in this study may have on one level apparently shared an ethnic identification with some of those researched, on another, they may not have shared gender, social class or other identity attributes and experiences. As such I concur with Howarth (2002, p.22) who argues that:

> *Suggestions that we can study only those similar to ourselves may bolster essentialistic assumptions that we fit into particular categories of others with the same intrinsic traits and concrete experiences (see also Francis 2001).*

Self-recriminations

Prior to undertaking this study I understood that being 'black' might mean different things not only to those we seek to research through this category, but also to those conducting the research who consider themselves 'black'. I was experienced enough to comprehend that being a 'black' researcher was no guarantee of encouraging 'black' staff to participate in the research. Nonetheless, I naively assumed that my appeals to individual 'black' staff at one institution would engender their engagement, but these requests were in vain. Regretfully, I internalised these 'black' staff rejection of the study as a rejection of me as a 'black' person. This led me to question whether or not I had presented myself as sufficiently 'black' (whatever this means in practice) to those I had

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interacted with and/or as someone who was able to connect with others of the same racial background. I queried what else I could have done to appeal to these staff sensibilities of being 'black'. I worried that I was somehow viewed and positioned as part of the college (white) establishment rather than as someone from an independent institution who shared experiences of racism.

Colleagues tried to reassure me that I was not to blame for the lack of recruitment of 'black' staff at the college in question, but it took a considerable amount of time to recover from these feelings of uncertainty. What was absent from these periods of self-doubt was first, an acknowledgement that respondents 'have the ultimate power to refuse to be involved in a study' (Phoenix 1994, p. 55). Second, that as active agents, the forms of agency exhibited by the non-respondents, could have been as a result of them being relatively 'powerless' in their college (and possibly other areas of their life). Thirdly, the act of non-participation does not constitute the sudden taking of power from the researcher or indicate that researchers are powerless in the research process (see Ali 2006). Indeed I retained power by emailing the non-responders and encouraging them to reflect on and respond to my comments, which they did (see James 2007). Nonetheless, the difficulties encountered illustrate the complex ways in which power is constructed, negotiated and experienced in researcher/researched power relationships, and supports post-structuralist arguments (e.g. Francis 2001) of power being at least in part, locally and individually constructed and exercised.

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Discussion

As a political category the term 'black' is open to challenge, as people's identities are not fixed or immutable. Furthermore, individuals have the right to choose how they wish to be identified. The ability of individuals to self-define (and the power derived from this) was demonstrated by a group of 'black' staff who refused to fit into the imposed category and participate in this study. Interestingly, most of the concerns expressed about the meaning of 'black' used in the research and how a list of 'black' staff had been composed at one institution came from South Asian members of staff; this assertion is based on the names that accompanied the various email responses. From this it seems fair to suggest that the staff who had the greatest difficulty identifying with the inclusive term 'black' were South Asian. This would seem to support Modood's (1994a/b) contention and that of other research (e.g. Brah 1992, 2000; Modood *et al*. 1997; Egharevba 2001; Aspinall 2002) that few people of South Asian heritage would define themselves as 'black' or accept the term as referring to themselves. Where South Asian respondents have defined themselves as 'black' this has been done with some difficulty (Sudbury 2001) because of its association with peoples of African and Caribbean heritage.

Phillips (2007, pp. 382-383) reported that a historical practice within the probation service of using the ethnic monitoring categories of 'White/Black/Other' to the exclusion of 'Asian' was responsible for some of her South Asian interviewees rejecting

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the term 'black'. It is unclear if a separation between 'black' and 'Asian' had been made if the designated 'black' staff in this study would have been more conducive to participating in the focus groups. Notwithstanding, individual interviews with participants who referred to themselves as both 'Asian' and 'black' suggests that unlike the South Asian contributors to the email discussion, many had an affinity with the term 'black' or saw it in 'pragmatic' terms (Phillips 2007, p. 385). Thus they did not object to being referred to as such. Moreover, it is possible that these South Asian staff had a heightened sense of awareness of being 'black' (and not just being culturally different – Modood *et al*. 1997) because of the time during which the data was being collected; shortly after September 11th 2001 – a time when the South Asian community was experiencing considerable backlash.

Arguably, an all-encompassing 'black' category is useful for exploring 'black' staff employment experiences as the 'black' experience is 'fantastically different from the white experience' (Chahal 1999, p.3). However, it would seem that the study's appeal to 'visible minorities' and those 'oppressed by racism' had little resonance for some 'black' staff as they did not consider themselves 'visible minorities' or necessarily 'oppressed by racism'. Yet colour-based racisms are embedded at an institutional level in contemporary Britain (e.g. Osler 1997; Macpherson 1999; Parekh 2000; Maylor *et al*. 2002; Shields and Wheatley Price 2002). Nonetheless, it is evident that some 'black' people do not acknowledge the existence of institutional racism (as doing so would 'damage their sense of being' – Carter *et al*. 1999, p. 55) or regard their experiences as being 'shaped' (Modood *et al*. 1997) or conditioned by racism (Essed 1991). Smith (2005, p.446) in

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exploring such lack of acknowledgement amongst African-American students, argues that whilst being constructed as 'black' provides those constituted as such 'with a 'third eye', that is 'a split consciousness on the meaning of their racial identity', this 'third eye' 'does not guarantee vision of racial discrimination'. Rather than a lack of vision, Chahal (1999, p.3) argues that experiences of racism are 'managed as part of the lived [*'black'*] experience' (emphasis added). Therefore such experiences are seemingly not given any greater credence than other experiences. It is salient that the 'black' staff in Carter *et al's* (1999, p.58) study saw 'racism as a problem for the[ir] institution not just ethnic minority staff'; which may go some way towards explaining why some 'black' staff in this research were reluctant to enter into a debate about experiences of institutional racism. Furthermore, although 'black' people may experience racism, their understandings and experiences of oppression are differentiated by several variables; not just ethnicity. Within education 'black' staff experiences are differentiated additionally by their status, role, contract type, promotional opportunities, institutional and geographical location. Experiences, like identities and affiliations (which may or may not be based upon identity) are complexly composed, and would need to be taken into consideration when examining the conditions/constraints/challenges under which potential respondents might 'choose' to participate (or not) in a study.

Clearly, the definition of 'black' applied in this study was inappropriate for some of the colleges and staff we wished to research. But, what remains unanswered is what would lead some 'black' staff to complete a questionnaire (operating the same definition) about their employment experiences, and at the same time discourage others from

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participating in focus group discussions. Previous research suggests that 'black' staff would have been more inclined to engage in focus groups rather than completing questionnaires. For example, Carter *et al*. (1999, p. 57) found that minority ethnic staff were suspicious of 'quantitative methodologies as they only scratched the surface of experience and therefore systematically understated the phenomenon of racism' in their institution. Similarly, Dyke and Gunaratnam (2000, p.326) contend that qualitative data is more effective in capturing 'the effects of racism and wider structural inequalities'. Sudbury (2001) reported the term 'black' as being a useful concept for provoking discussion and facilitating shared understandings of oppression. This would seem to indicate the suitability of focus groups (as well as individual interviews) for unlocking 'black' staff experiences of racism and other inequalities. Unfortunately, the email discussants and some other staff did not share any of these viewpoints. This suggests further research is needed which explores reasons for participating/not engaging in 'race' related research predicated upon collective terms. Additionally, closer scrutiny would need to be given to the factors that might influence some groups to perceive themselves as 'black' in one context, but not in others. Without such an understanding the implications for data collection are likely to be immense.

Conclusion

This paper has shown that the political category 'black' remains problematic. In this study the term was insufficient to capture the experiences of all those incorporated within the category. The tensions evident in the email discourse and the questionnaire responses

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(national and case studies) epitomised 'insecurities of meaning' (Gunaratnam 2003) individually and collectively around the term 'black'. The experiences encountered illustrate the need for the use of appropriate ethnic categories that facilitate respondent self-definition and individual research participation. They also underline calls by Bonnett and Carrington (2001, p.491) for the 'diversity of identities within 'black' communities to be recognised' in research.

This research has underlined the complexity of the different discourses associated with being 'black' and the need to problematise 'catch all' categories. Without such an understanding it will be difficult to conduct research that has 'black' communities as a key concern. This study has raised queries about data collection that should be of concern to all researchers; namely how the opting for particular terminologies (without engendering a shared understanding) can negatively impact on the data collection and analytical process. If researchers are to gain access to diverse communities and secure their involvement in the research process, it will be important to use terms that are considered appropriate and acceptable by the communities we seek to investigate. Recognition rather than misrepresentation of diverse groups will facilitate constructive dialogue and lead to an enhanced research process both for participants and researchers.

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Notes

[1] 'Black' is used throughout in inverted commas to highlight the contested nature of the term.

[2] Institutions with large numbers of 'black' staff (as identified from the national survey) were targeted for the case study research.

[3] As researchers we are expected to work to the highest ethical standards by obtaining informed consent when conducting research, but at the time the emails were not construed as data therefore no attempt was made to obtain consent to use the emails. As such making reference to the content of the emails poses an ethical dilemma. However, the fact that the emails were forwarded to me by an interviewee and I had replied to an earlier email that contained messages sent by the group and their names, and they in turn responded to my email, suggests they were not concerned that I was privy to their thoughts or names. While the ethical dilemma remains, the emails are worthy of consideration as they provide an insight into how the concept of 'Black' is viewed.

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